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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000682

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: "INTERNET PIONEERS" SEEK TO USE WEB TO EASE  
SYRIA'S ISOLATION

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter per 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Three twenty-something Syrian entrepreneurs recently started an Arabic-language website called Masaader.com ("Sources") and a marketing and advertising research firm associated with the British Internet-based marketing firm YouGov in the hopes of developing Syria-specific Internet content for the country's young people. Criticizing SARG censorship of some Internet sites like Facebook and YouTube, the young men said they have learned to steer clear of politics on their websites and in their surveys of Syrians. Through their focus on business news, social trends, and marketing data, these Syrian entrepreneurs said they hope their work will broaden the boundaries of expression on the Internet in Syria and help end the country's "isolation from the world." END SUMMARY.

"WE DON'T WANT TO FEEL ISOLATED"

¶2. (C) Bisher Challah, a 28-year-old Syrian entrepreneur, recently started the Arabic-language website Masaader.com ("Sources") with his brother, 25-year-old Khaled Challah, in order to "become pioneers on the Internet in Syria." Khaled and 25-year-old Firas Rankousi took their ambitions further by starting a second website for their marketing and advertising research firm, Indicate, which is associated with the British Internet-based marketing firm YouGov. Indicate's English and Arabic-language website, imaar.com, conducts surveys of Syrian social and consumer attitudes to sell to companies hoping to do business in Syria. "This is all new for Syria. We have a lot of energy and want to do a lot to improve our country. The Internet is a way to do that," said Rankousi, who serves as Indicate's Chief Operating Officer.

¶3. (C) The young men, who all attended university abroad, said they were inspired to use the Internet to help end the isolation they say Syrians face. While studying with foreign students, they were struck by the Internet's relatively late entry into Syrian homes and came to believe that it correlated with their country's political isolation. "When we went to school outside Syria, our foreign friends had been using the Internet since they were kids, but it didn't come here until 2001 or 2002," observed Khaled Challah, who attended Lebanese American University in Beirut.

¶4. (C) His American University of Sharjah(UAE)-educated brother, Bisher, noted young Syrians feel a sense of shame when they see Syria on lists of state-sponsors of terrorism. "It's embarrassing for me when I am filling out a visa application, and Syria is listed next to Cuba and North Korea," he said. The young men said the economic sanctions imposed on Syria by the United States make it impossible for Syrians to keep up with technological advancements in other countries, adding to young Syrians' sense of isolation. They pointed to the dilapidated state of Syrian Airlines as an example, blaming U.S. sanctions for the airline's situation. Bisher added he sometimes faces difficulty opening international credit card accounts because he lives in Syria.

"All of this combines to make us feel isolated, and the Internet is a way to go beyond that. We don't want to feel isolated in Syria," he concluded.

#### MASAADER.COM FOCUSES ON YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS

15. (C) With a staff of over ten, the young men focus on business and marketing news on Masaader.com, including interviews with Syrian businesspeople, tailoring the site to a younger generation of Syrian entrepreneurs. The website includes sections for economic news, reports, interviews, and services including airline schedules for Damascus International Airport. Advertisements for alumni events in Damascus for graduates of the American University of Beirut and Lebanese American University flash on the screen. A recent interview with businessman Ali Ibrahim Abdullah, a member of the board of directors for the Syrian Islamic Bank, was featured prominently on the site. The young businessmen said they are averaging between 500-600 hits each week on Masaader.com. "That's good enough for right now. People are starting to know about us," Bisher said. While Indicate and imaar.com are not directly affiliated with Masaader.com, the latter features links to imaar.com on its site.

16. (C) A range of Syrian businesses and institutions advertise on Masaader.com, including the Damascus Securities Exchange and Syria Today magazine. Bisher, who said he strives to find a balance between independent expression and "promoting Syria's image," highlights press releases from some SARG ministries, including tourism and transportation. Despite hosting content from the SARG, the site's creators stress their independence. "The site is not for the

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government or against the government. We are independent, but we also want to strengthen Syria's image as a country," he said. "It's part of our culture in the Arab world to be proud of our leader, and we want to be proud of al-Asad."

#### IMAAR.COM AND YOUNGOV: STEERING CLEAR OF POLITICAL DEBATE ON THE INTERNET

17. (C) While stressing that they are not anti-SARG in their political opinions, the young men are critical of limits on freedom of expression on the Internet. "We don't understand why the government bans Facebook and YouTube," the Canadian-educated Rankousi said. "I heard that it was because some people were using Facebook to contact Israelis, but none of us really knows," he added. Khaled said he and Rankousi "stay away from politics" in the surveys they conduct for Indicate and YouGov. "That's not allowed in Syria," he said. (NOTE: On September 14, the National Organization for Human Rights said a Syrian court had sentenced a 31-year-old blogger, Karim Antoine Arbaji, to three years in prison for "spreading false news that weakens the nation's morals." Arbaji frequently writes about corruption in Syria on the Internet. END NOTE).

18. (C) Instead, Indicate and its website imaar.com focus on surveys of Syrian consumers' spending habits and social attitudes. "Companies are interested in knowing what people are thinking, so that they know how to market things to them," Khaled Challah explained. The young men added that while their work is not overtly political, their questions encourage freedom of thought and expression. "When people are asked what they like to do and what they like to buy, that is a part of connecting people to the world," Khaled added. The entrepreneurs noted their marketing work also brings with it the potential of profit. "That's the free market," one exclaimed. Coming from well-established, wealthy Damascene families, the young men stressed they are not seeking to undermine the Syrian political system with their work on the Internet. "We want stability. Countries grow with stability, and things are better when the people have money," Bisher Challah said. "But what we do want is to show that we in Syria are part of the world," he added.

19. (C) COMMENT. While Masaader.com and imaar.com are still in their infancy, their emergence is part of the growth of Syrian-based Internet sites since the web began to spread in Syria earlier this decade. While the Internet came late to Syria, many in the younger generation see its potential to help them make a profit. In the process, they may also be broadening the limits of Internet expression in Syria. Even though the SARG continues to deprive Syrian young people of Facebook and YouTube, these young businessmen still see the Internet as a tool for ending Syria's isolation from the world. END COMMENT.  
HUNTER